Right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics? Identity, otherness and global imaginaries in debating world politics online

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Abstract

The past few years have seen an emerging discourse on Chinese social media that combines the claims, vocabulary and style of right-wing populisms in Europe and North America with previous forms of nationalism and racism in Chinese cyberspace. In other words, it provokes a similar hostility towards immigrants, Muslims, feminism, the so-called 'liberal elites' and progressive values in general. This article examines how, in debating global political events such as the European refugee crisis and the American presidential election, well-educated and well-informed Chinese Internet users appropriate the rhetoric of 'Western-style' right-wing populism to paradoxically criticise Western hegemony and discursively construct China's ethno-racial and political identities. Through qualitative analysis of 1038 postings retrieved from a popular social media website, this research shows that by criticising Western 'liberal elites', the discourse constructs China's ethno-racial identity against the 'inferior' non-Western other, exemplified by non-white immigrants and Muslims, with racial nationalism on the one hand; and formulates China's political identity against the 'declining' Western other with realist authoritarianism on the other. The popular narratives of global order protest against Western hegemony while reinforcing a state-centric and hierarchical imaginary of global racial and civilisational order. We conclude by suggesting that the discourse embodies the logics of anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies. This article: (1) provides critical insights into the changing ways in which self–other relations are imagined in Chinese popular geopolitical discourse; (2) sheds light on the global circulation of extremist discourses facilitated by the Internet; and (3) contributes to the ongoing debate on right-wing populism and the 'crisis' of the liberal world order.

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Introduction

> The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive.
> (US President Donald Trump's speech in Warsaw, Poland, July 2017)

> It's about the instinct of survival. The West has lost this instinct, but China has it.
> (A Zhihu posting on the question of 'Muslims in the West', May 2016[1])

On 20 June 2017, World Refugee Day, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) posted a brief message raising awareness about the plight of displaced people around the world through its official account on Weibo, a pre-eminent Chinese social media platform. The post was soon bombarded with some 30,000 negative comments, and the reaction was so overwhelming that the organisation's goodwill ambassador was forced to come forward and clarify that she had never advocated for China to take in refugees (Ryan, 2017). The recently widespread anti-refugee sentiment in Chinese cyberspace,[2] the surge of online Islamophobia (Leibold, 2016) and the exceptional popularity of American President Donald Trump in the country (Carlson, 2018), at least before the trade dispute intensified, all draw our attention to an emerging online discourse that combines traditional elements of Chinese cyber-nationalism, which has been much discussed in international studies (e.g. Cairns and Carlson, 2016; Hughes, 2000), with the ideology, vocabulary and style of right-wing populisms in Europe and North America. In other words, it provokes a similar hostility towards immigrants, Muslims, multiculturalism, the so-called 'liberal elites' — known as the 'white left' in Chinese online communities (Zhang, 2017) — and progressive social movements in general. However, compared to its Western counterparts, right-wing populist discourse in China takes issue with the international order from a different geopolitical perspective and integrates popular discontents with the 'liberal hegemonic order' (Acharya, 2014) with expressions of nativist and authoritarian ideologies. Although reproducing many of the claims of nationalism, racism and Han supremacism that have long existed on the Chinese Internet (Cheng, 2011; Leibold, 2010), the emergent discourse also rearticulates national identity and self–other relations in new ways by shifting focus from historical memories of 'pride and humiliation' (Callahan, 2012; Gries, 2004) to debating the political norms and values of the present.

Puzzled by this unexplored phenomenon, this article examines how, in debating global political events such as the European refugee crisis and the American presidential election, well-educated Chinese Internet users appropriate the rhetoric of 'Western-style' right-wing populism to paradoxically criticise Western hegemony, on the one hand, and discursively construct China's ethno-racial and political identities, on the other. We also interpret the discourse as popular narratives of global order, which diverge in certain ways from (and converge in other ways with) official and academic discourses that largely monopolise accounts of 'Chinese' visions of global order. The article is premised on the recognition that the configurations of right-wing populist discourses in both

Western and Chinese contexts are best understood in relation to the hierarchies and paradoxes immanent to the liberal world order.

Our theoretical understandings of discourse and identity are informed by poststructuralist approaches in International Relations (IR) and critical geopolitics. There has been an extensive literature in IR that employs discourse analysis to investigate the ways in which words and images constitute social realities in global politics, rather than simply represent pre-existing identities, norms or power relations (e.g. Hansen, 2006; Milliken, 1999; Shepherd, 2015). The poststructuralist perspective challenges the dichotomy of discourse and practice, focusing on the 'iterative practices through which "things" become meaningful' (Shepherd, 2015: 890) and identities, which do not have an a priori essence, are performed. Similarly, scholars of critical geopolitics view geopolitical identities and imaginations not as pre-given facts, but as processes of constructing 'spatial, political, and cultural boundaries to demarcate the domestic space from the threatening other' (Dalby, 1990: 173), which take place not only in formal practices of statecraft, but also in various societal avenues such as mass media and popular culture. More recently, as Suslov (2014) has noted, the rapid development of digital communications blurs the boundary between 'formal' and 'popular' forms of spatialising practices as government agencies and officials increasingly use online media to directly communicate with the public, and digital citizens are able to engage in the production of geopolitical knowledge 'from below'.

The article explores the construction of self–other relations and global imaginaries in online discourse through a qualitative analysis of 1038 postings retrieved from Zhihu, a social media platform for knowledge sharing that has been actively engaged in debating Western politics and especially the 'white left'. Using analytical tools from critical discourse analysis (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009), the study shows that the online debates not only exemplify the global circulation of extremist discourses facilitated by the Internet, but also, more importantly, demonstrate the changing ways in which Chinese national identities and the global order are imagined by pro-globalisation and anti-liberal urban netizens. Specifically, in criticising Western 'liberal elites' or the 'white left', the discourse: reconstructs China's ethno-racial identity against the 'inferior' non-Western other with racial nationalism, on the one hand; and formulates China's political identity against the 'declining' Western other with realist authoritarianism, on the other.

The popular narratives of global order protest against Western hegemony while reinforcing a state-centric and hierarchical imaginary of global racial and civilisational order. Taken together, we argue that the discourse epitomises what we would call anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies. It embraces and perpetuates Eurocentric assumptions about nation, race and development to dismiss the self-reflexive sensitivity of liberal democracy as irrational, moralistic and destructive, which, in turn, is used to underline the superiority of the 'pragmatic' authoritarianism of the Chinese regime. Furthermore, it coincides with the party-state's strategy in turning anti-hegemonic sentiments and realist perceptions of geopolitical rivalries into excuses to eradicate difference and homogenise imaginations of Chinese political identity. Recognising the contradictions and complexity of non-Western agency (Hobson and Sajed, 2017) prompts us to question dominant world political binaries such as the West versus the East and the liberal versus the illiberal.

The article proceeds as follows. We start by clarifying the term 'right-wing populism' and connecting the discussion with critical scholarship on the liberal order, which posits that racialised structures of inclusion and exclusion are integral to the liberal project on both domestic and international levels. We then point to the immediate and broader contexts in which right-wing populist discourse began to emerge in Chinese cyberspace, noting that the European refugee crisis and the American presidential election were key events that reinforced previous forms of ethnic nationalism and stimulated the circulation of transnational extremist discourses on the Chinese Internet. After introducing our data and method, the main section summarises the major themes and ideological features of the discourse, which at its core articulates racial nationalism and realist authoritarianism through diagnosing the problems of Western 'liberal elites'. It then scrutinises the ways in which China's ethno-racial and political identities are constructed therein against the threatening other and the declining other, respectively. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies for understanding China's domestic politics and international relations.

Right-wing populism and the liberal world order

The past two decades have seen an explosion of academic interest in the term 'populism', owing to the success of what are labelled 'populist radical right' or 'extreme right' parties across Europe, and most recently triggered by the unexpected outcome of the Brexit referendum and Trump's election (e.g. Gusterson, 2017; Mudde, 2007; Wodak, 2015). Populism, however, is notoriously difficult to define. It has been described as a political and communication style (Moffitt, 2016), a strategy of mobilisation and ruling (Weyland, 2001), a 'thin' ideology in the sense that it does not offer a comprehensive or coherent belief system and is often combined with other, leftist or rightist, ideologies (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016), or a combination of all of the above. Despite the conceptual diversity, scholars working with a minimalist definition of populism generally understand its core proposition as 'an appeal to "the people"' against 'the established structure of power' or the ruling elites (Canovan, 1999: 2; see also Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016). For democratic theorists, the populist claim to represent the will of 'the real people' against the 'corrupt elites' (Mudde, 2007: 23) may be considered both a threat to liberal democracy and a symptom of its failures (Panizza, 2005). So long as 'the people' functions as a floating signifier that can be attached to any groups and subjects, constructing its boundaries and exact meanings is a crucial aspect of populist politics.

The object of inquiry in this article is specifically limited to right-wing populism, which, along with other variants of the term (Gusterson, 2017), has been used to categorise rightist parties and movements that share certain similarities and take vastly different forms depending on national political systems and socio-economic circumstances (Pelinka, 2013). Mudde identifies three core ideological features in his analysis of populist radical right parties in Europe, namely, nativism, authoritarianism and populism.[3] Our approach to right-wing populism as ideologies and discourses also emphasises these features. The nativist or nationalist dimension is captured by the concept of nationalist populism. In addition to the antagonism on the vertical level between 'the people' and the 'elites', nationalist populism also presupposes a polarised opposition on the horizontal

level between an imagined, 'homogenous ethnic community and its ethno-cultural other' (Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 2; see also Brubaker, 2017), typically represented by the figure of immigrants and Muslims in the rhetoric of contemporary populist right parties. According to Stavrakakis et al., (2017), some of the parties in contemporary Europe labelled as 'populist' are better categorised as 'nationalist' and are only 'secondarily' populist. Pelinka (2013: 9) similarly notes that the populist zeitgeist in contemporary Europe is not so much about mobilising 'against the (perceived) enemy above' than against the perceived enemy from abroad.

Compared to exclusionary nativism, theoretical reflections on the authoritarian dimension of right-wing populism are much more diverse. Researchers of populist right movements in Western democracies tend to use authoritarianism to refer to attitudes, beliefs and values rather than regime types. Influenced by social-psychological approaches (Altemeyer, 1988; Feldman, 2003), authoritarianism is understood as a preference for 'uniformity and order' and a punitive approach to defending established rules and norms (MacWilliams, 2016: 717; see also Mudde, 2007). Identifying authoritarianism as one of the two core components of extreme right ideology, Harrison and Bruter (2011: 100–102) further differentiate a social conception, which emphasises traditional values and a 'previously existing utopian order', and an institutional conception of authoritarianism, which calls for a strong state and especially strengthened state power to fight 'disruptive elements in society'. In Inglehart and Norris's (2017) account of what they term 'populist authoritarian parties', authoritarianism signifies the cultural backlash against postmaterialist values, or values prioritising 'autonomy, self-expression and the quality of life' (Inglehart, 2007). As to be shown later, institutional authoritarianism and criticisms of postmaterialist values constitute a core ideological dimension in the online discourse analysed here.

Although there has been a burgeoning literature on right-wing populism in political science, the discipline of IR, partly due to its tendency to separate the political from the international, has not paid much attention to the phenomenon until recently. Britain's decision to leave the European Union (EU) and Trump's ascent to power have changed this and led prominent theorists of the liberal world order to contend that the international order is perhaps more threatened by the resurgence of 'far right populism' within the West than by so-called revisionist states (Colgan and Keohane, 2017; Ikenberry, 2018). However, we consider that the growing influence of xenophobic, authoritarian and populist ideas in both Western and Chinese contexts cannot be understood without recognising that racialised nativism, implicating exclusion and hierarchisation against particular groups of people within and outside the Westphalian nation-state, is immanent, rather than external, to the world order known as liberal. It is useful here to briefly review mainstream and critical perspectives on the alleged crisis of the liberal world order.

Liberal internationalists theorise the post-1945 world order as an 'open, rule-based, and progressive' international order built on American-driven efforts to promote 'open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty' and 'the rule of law' in varied combinations (Ikenberry, 2011: 2). While internationalists do not deny the role of hierarchy and power politics in the explicitly US-centred order — a 'Westphalian system of sovereign states organized around a group of leading states arrayed in a rough power

equilibrium' (Ikenberry, 2011: xii) — it is argued that the ordering is 'more liberal than imperial' (Ikenberry, 2009: 77). In recent years, observers have popularised the view that the liberal order is in 'crisis', challenged by rising illiberal powers, on the one hand, and the hegemon's reluctance to commit to liberal internationalist values, on the other (Koivisto and Dunne, 2010).

For critics, however, the liberal international order not only has its origin in European imperial and colonial histories characterised by violence and domination, but also continues to legitimate hierarchical relations through a series of 'world political binaries' (Austin, 2017): the West and the non-West; the liberal and the illiberal; the civilised and the barbarian; and so forth. It is argued that the Eurocentric ordering of the international has an uneasy relationship with difference in conceiving of 'others as not properly different, but either threatening or just behind a historical queue' (Nordin, 2016: 156). Hobson and Hall (2013) consider the practices of liberal internationalism 'schizophrenic' as the principles of interdependence and non-intervention apply only to the relations between 'civilised states', not to those between Western and non-Western states. Scholars also point out that imperialism is not antithetical to, but consistent with, liberalism, which governs those subjects recognised as rational, autonomous beings through freedom, while permits disciplinary or punitive forms of power to be exercised upon those viewed as 'subjects of improvement' (Hindess, 2001). The civilising mission of liberal imperialism paradoxically 'reproduces and reinforces hierarchies even as it sets itself to overcome them' (Hutchings, 2013: 172) to achieve universal progress.

In this vein, the militarisation of borders and criminalisation of irregular immigration in the Global North increasingly spells out the illiberal aspect of liberal states (Guild et al., 2009) and the persistent centrality of statist norms to the international order. As Balibar (1991: 21) notes, the category of immigration has become a 'substitute for the notion of race', which itself has shifted its dominant framework from biological heredity to the 'the insurmountability of cultural differences'.[4] If the production of racial hierarchies in biological terms was indispensable to the formation of national identity in earlier times, the category of culture or civilisation now functions 'like a nature' (Balibar, 1991: 22) to shape configurations of national security/identity (Persaud, 2002) and justify practices of exclusion within and beyond state borders.

Pointing out that illiberal, imperialist and ethno-nationalist practices and mentalities, especially in relation to immigration, are integral to the post-1945 world order labelled as liberal is not to ignore the political and socio-economic specificities behind the resurgence of the populist right at the present conjuncture. Empirical studies seeking to explain voters' support for right populist politicians in Western democracies have suggested various individual-level and structural factors, such as racial resentment, authoritarian values and economic anxiety (e.g. Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018; Inglehart and Norris, 2017; MacWilliams, 2016). While there is no space here to review this literature in detail, suffice it to note that both economic and identitarian explanations have an international dimension. For the populist right, globalisation and regional integration are blamed for both economic grievances and the increased share of immigrants and minority ethnic groups in society. Mutz (2018) argues that the perceived decline of 'US global dominance' also contributes to the sense of status threat among 'traditionally high-status' Americans. Perceptions of the international order play an even more explicit role in the

justification of extreme right ideologies in the Chinese digital sphere. While expressions of racialised nativism and authoritarianism in the 'heartlands' of the liberal order are linked to discontents with economic globalisation, they are entangled with a revolt against Western dominance in the normative and political hierarchy of world order in Chinese cyberspace.

Before proceeding, a caveat about the use of the term 'populism' in the Chinese context is in order. This research focuses on Chinese criticisms of Western left-leaning 'elites' that appear to reproduce the anti-elitist, xenophobic and anti-liberal narratives characteristic of right-wing populist discourses in Europe and beyond. Although these discussions adopt a populist style in the sense that they refer to the interests of 'ordinary people' versus the manipulation of political and cultural elites, they are presented as observations and diagnoses of Western politics and do not seek to advance a populist, anti-establishment agenda to challenge the domestic regime. The discourse rather instrumentalises anti-elitist rhetorics to legitimate racial nationalist, illiberal and anti-Western claims. That said, it is not unusual that authoritarian and hybrid regimes rely on forms of 'official populism' as a tool of governance and regime stabilisation.[5] In Russia and China, official populist rhetoric is used to legitimate the status quo by framing Western pressure for political reform and 'imported ideas from abroad' as detrimental to the interests of the people (Robinson and Milne, 2017). The popular discourse against the 'white left' in this respect coincides with the officially sanctioned campaign against universal values and 'Western' ideologies. Both popular and official visions, however, involve an authoritarian 'schizophrenia' that demands pluralism on the international level while discrediting dissensus, often in the name of resisting Western hegemony, in domestic politics.

From cyber-nationalism to right-wing populism online

While it is not the purpose here to offer causal accounts of why some Chinese netizens are attracted to the rhetoric of the populist right, the approach of critical discourse analysis requires us to position texts, utterances and discourses within their immediate context of situation and the broader socio-political context. The following domestic and international developments are most pertinent to contextualising the online discourse in question.

First, the rapid development of online communication has created a dynamic digital space that allows citizens to participate in public deliberations that are otherwise impossible. Research suggests that new media in China has both given rise to opportunities of political contestation and enabled state apparatuses to develop sophisticated censorship and persuasion measures to strengthen authoritarian rule (Han, 2018; Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015). The Internet has contributed particularly to the diversification of nationalistic consciousness and become an important channel 'by which the most globalised segment of the Chinese population, namely, educated urban youths, expresses the multifaceted discourse' of nationalism (Zhao, 2008: 193–197). The extreme right end of nationalistic Internet users has been drawn to cyber-racism (Cheng, 2011) and Han supremacism (Leibold, 2010). The former reinforces globally imagined racial hierarchies and the latter applies a similar binary of progress and backwardness to the

relationship between the Han majority and minority ethnic groups within China. These forms of racialised nationalism would be reaffirmed and amplified in the online debates on immigration, race and Muslims in Western societies.

Second, China observers have drawn attention to the emergence of a 'hybrid socialist-neoliberal form of political rationality' (Sigley, 2006) in the transformation of economic structures and modes of governance in post-reform China (Bray and Jeffreys, 2016; Zhang, 2018). Wang Hui views the marketisation of society as enabling the formation of a 'capitalist consensus' based on a negation of revolutionary legacies and a politics of depoliticisation (Wang, 2007). Sociological research finds that patterns of value changes do not accord with Inglehart's assumption that economic growth and individual-level affluence are likely to lead to support for liberal values. It shows that high-income groups, who have benefited most from the economic status quo, are no less 'xenophobic, authoritarian or more desirous of democracy' than low-status groups (Zhang et al., 2017). On the other hand, however, citizen activism has become increasingly visible in the limited space of civil society, especially in areas that are not perceived as politically destabilising: from environmentalism to feminism, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) rights, and animal welfare more recently. The visibility of new social movements on the Internet, though highly oppressed in reality, can be mobilised by conservatives to generate a backlash against postmaterialist values. In fact, online criticisms of Western 'liberal elites' have made their way to debates on domestic issues, being used against Chinese nationals sympathetic with liberal-egalitarian values.

Third, China's rising economic and military powers have led netizens to be more confident in the authoritarian status quo and disenchanted with the ideal of democracy. The immediate context in which Chinese Internet users began to pick up the vocabulary of the populist right was the European refugee crisis and the US presidential election of 2016, which, on the one hand, prompted netizens to familiarise themselves with the anti-refugee and anti-liberal rhetoric of Western conservatives, and, on the other, were seen as epitomes of the inevitable decline of Western democracy. The Internet plays a significant role in the 'globalisation of extremist discourse' (Baumgarten, 2017) and the transnationalisation of right-wing populist mobilisations (Caiani and Kröll, 2015). If the attention to the refugee crisis on Chinese social media was centred on anti-immigration, Islamophobic and racist framings, then the subsequent discussions on the American election revolved more around criticisms of postmaterialist values and the disdain for 'political correctness'. As the explosion of social media platforms radically decentralises the production and consumption of (mis)information, Internet users can easily access and reproduce globally circulating narratives such as Islamophobia, white supremacism and anti-feminism. Resembling the transnational Islamophobic discourse elsewhere (Horsti, 2017), for example, the theme of 'Muslim rape' and the depiction of Sweden as a country 'destroyed by Muslim immigrants and feminists' also emerged in the Chinese cyber-sphere.

Data and method

Based on participant observation conducted on major social media websites since 2015, we opted to collect textual data from Zhihu, a Quora-like question-and-answer website
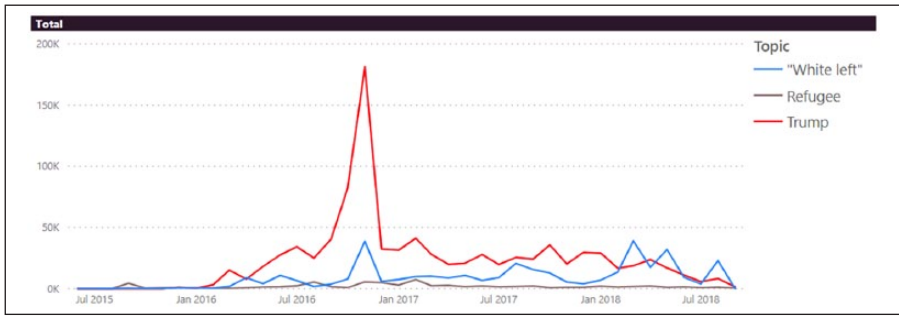
Figure 1. Distribution of posts under the topics of Trump, refugees and the 'white left' (July 2015–July 2018).

known as China's biggest knowledge-sharing platform. This is because: (1) the website hosts extensive debates on refugees, Trump and Western 'liberal elites', which are the main nodal points in which right-wing populist discourses in Chinese cyberspace are anchored; and (2) compared to other platforms, Zhihu contains more quality, argumentative and information-rich postings that are suitable for qualitative discourse analysis (Patton, 2002). The sampling is therefore purposive and based on the research question that seeks to explore how (mis)informed Internet users appropriate 'Western-style' populist right discourses to produce popular narratives about national identities, otherness and global order. Demographically, Zhihu users are generally better educated and better paid than average Internet users in China. Market research indicates that typical Zhihu users are university students and professionals living in first- and second-tier cities, with 80% possessing a bachelor's degree or above (Yang, 2018). Some of the participants in the debates are international students or recent immigrants in Europe and the US, who would describe their first-hand experiences with the 'white left' and various 'problems' ranging from immigration, multiculturalism and political correctness, to overly lenient justice system allegedly caused by the prevalence of postmaterialist values.

The website consists of user-generated question threads that are labelled with 'topics' (*huati*) or hashtags. Each question-and-answer thread contains any number of 'answers' (*huida*), and each answer is followed by comments (*pinglun*). Figure 1 shows the distribution of posts (including all questions, answers and comments) under the hashtags 'refugees', 'Trump' and 'white left' between 2015 and 2018. Similar to 'social justice warriors', the 'white left' or *baizuo* is a derogatory term invented and mainly used by its opponents to refer to those who endorse progressive values such as feminism, multiculturalism, equal rights movements and environmentalism in Western societies. We opted to sample postings within this topic rather than from the other two because discussions on the 'white left' bind together a variety of populist right themes such as anti-immigration, racism, anti-elitism and market liberalism. The sample could therefore give us an overview of the major topics and ideological features of emergent right-wing discourses on the Chinese Internet. Three representative question-and-answer threads (Q1–Q3 in Table 2 in Appendix 1) were chosen based on their clear reference to the Chinese self-image and the large number of answers they had attracted. At the time of data collection,

the questions had received a total number of 1190 answers, of which 1038 were deemed to contain relevant textual information,[6] and these answers further received 11,744 comments. Answers are typically informative essays directly addressing the posed question, such as 'why most Chinese people dislike the white left'. Comments are short remarks made with respect to each answer. We included all 1038 textual answers, posted between February 2015 and June 2018, in the analysis yet excluded the comments as a large share of them are irrelevant to the posed questions, as well as due to concerns of feasibility.

A two-step strategy of analysis is adopted broadly in accordance with Krzyżanowski's (2010) 'multilevel approach' that integrates 'entry-level' and 'in-depth' analyses. In the first step, the entire collection of texts is read through and manually coded in NVivo. The objective is to map key topics and tendencies in the 'overall framing of the discussed issues' (Krzyżanowski, 2018: 103). In the second step, passages specifically referring to us–them distinctions (us = both People's Republic of China [PRC] nationals and Chinese diasporas; them = both the Western other and the non-Western other) are selected. In-depth interpretive analysis of these segments aims to detail the ways in which Chinese ethno-racial and political identities are articulated. Analytical tools developed in the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to discourse analysis are drawn upon. For example, the communicative strategies of *nomination*, which in DHA concerns how persons and groups are referred to linguistically, and of *predication*, which denotes the 'discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena' and so on 'more or less positively or negatively' (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009: 94), are instrumental in the demonisation of 'black people, Mexicans and Muslims' (*heimolü*) as a collective out-group. The DHA also situates a text in relation to four levels of 'context': the 'immediate, language internal context'; the intertextual relationship between 'utterances, texts, genres and discourses'; social and 'institutional frames of a specific context of situation'; and the 'broader socio-political and historical context' (Reisigl, 2017: 53). Special attention is paid to intertextuality and historical contexts in our analysis. For instance, the discourse of race in the formative years of the modern Chinese nation is an indispensable historical context for comprehending online expressions of racial nationalism and imaginations of global racial hierarchy today.

Identity, otherness and the global imaginary

> If those whose first reaction after their country gets in trouble is to go to other countries,
> eat for free, behave like masters, keep committing crimes, and act extremely
> aggressive are devils, then the white left is Pandora who unleashed
> devils from the box. (Q1, #336678085, 8 March 2018)

This section presents the findings by first outlining the key topics, themes and rhetorical strategies that emerged in the discussion, and then explicating how different dimensions of self–other relations are constructed and global imaginaries mapped. As Figure 2 shows, the vast majority of the answers take a negative attitude towards the so-called 'white left', while a small percentage of responses are 'ambivalent'. The latter means that these users either question the validity of the term as such or agree that the group
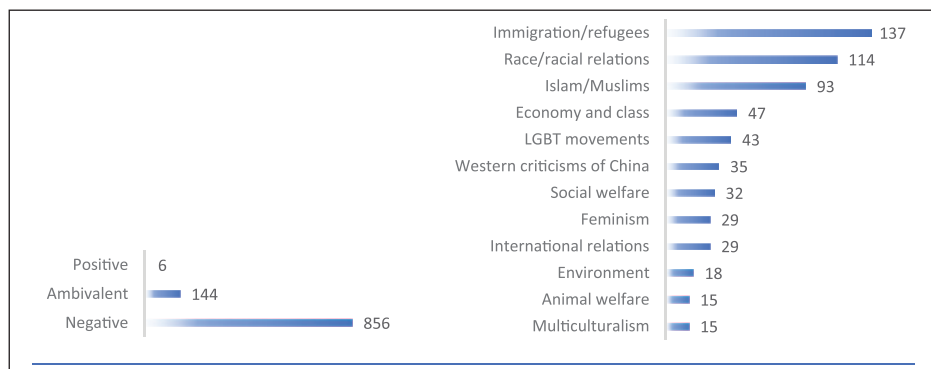
Figure 2. Attitudes towards the 'white left' and count of answers by topics discussed.
Note: One answer may discuss multiple issues.

Figure 3. Word cloud of the corpus (excluding 'white left').

exists but argue that their contribution should be acknowledged despite their flaws. The topics, ideologies and strategies of argumentation in Chinese criticisms of the 'white left' overlap to a large degree with those of right-wing populist discourses in the West (Krämer, 2017; Wodak, 2015).[7] The most salient issue categories are immigration/refugees, race/racial relations and Islam/Muslims. Regarding the economy and social welfare, critics of *baizuo* either attack redistributive economic policies and the welfare state or assert that immigrants and minority ethnic groups (bar Chinese immigrants) are welfare dependants. Other topics deal with postmaterialist values such as feminism, environmentalism and LGBT rights (see Figures 2 and 3). While the anti-elitist rhetoric is highly visible, we consider the core ideological features to be racial nationalism (taking the form of racism, nativism and Islamophobia) and realist authoritarianism (associated with authoritarianism, realpolitik and social Darwinism).

First, discussants take an anti-elitist stance by *naming* a presumably identifiable group of left-leaning 'elites' the 'white left' and characterising its members as either stupid or evil. The 'stupid' pack are said to be naive, simple-minded and ignorant of 'real problems' in the world, whereas the 'evil' ones are corrupt, deceptive and hypocritically endorsing progressive ideas only to stay in power. Many refer to their own upbringings and claim that they could relate more to the 'ordinary people' in the US than American liberal elites do. A famous phrase from Emperor Hui of the Jin Dynasty (259–307 AD) — 'Why don't they eat meat porridge?' — is mentioned in 33 answers[8] and has become a paradigmatic catchphrase for Chinese netizens to ridicule Western elites, who, just like in the US, are seen as 'out of touch with or indifferent to the concerns and problems of ordinary people' (Brubaker, 2017: 1192). However, anti-elitism as such remains a secondary ideology in our interpretation of the discourse. Users criticise Western 'liberal elites' not because they are elites per se, but because of what they stand for — in this framing, what they stand for are immigration, Muslims and an egalitarian society threatening hierarchy, law and order. As the following postings put it:

> We're just ordinary people concerned about the changes in the world because these changes will affect us. The ultimate reason why I hate the white left is that they've turned my worldview upside down. They want a world in which everyone would have freedom; everyone should be equal; both humans and dogs would be protected; and there wouldn't be billionaires or paupers. (Q2, #127579111, 20 October 2016)

> If someone thinks freedom is more important than security, they must be either a lunatic or a criminal. (Q1, #376124045, 25 April 2018)

This brings us to the core ideological features in the online debates: racial nationalism and what we call realist authoritarianism. Racial nationalism refers here to a kind of exclusionary ethnic nationalism that defines national belonging primarily in ethnic and cultural terms, and that views ethno-cultural others as 'fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state' (Mudde, 2007: 19). The narratives of ethnic lineage and cultural homogeneity are also associated with an implicit or explicit formulation of ethno-racial hierarchies and the essentialisation of cultural differences. Taking the forms of xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia, racial nationalism undergirds the discussion on issues of immigration, race and Muslims in both Western and Chinese societies. Realist authoritarianism prioritises materialist values, defined by Inglehart (2007) as those focused on economic and physical security, to the extent that it regards political values and goals that are deemed irrelevant to economic development and societal/national security as, at best, useless and, at worst, destructive. Realist authoritarians are inclined to justify their preference for authoritarian values (e.g. strong authority, strict social order and a punitive justice system) and contempt for morality, pluralism or democracy in utilitarian/pragmatic rather than normative terms. Such a worldview entails a social-Darwinist belief in the survival of the strongest, which is preoccupied with competitions between nations/races/civilisations on the international level, and linked to an economic agenda emphasising self-reliance, competition and individual performance on the domestic level. The racist and authoritarian aspects are inextricably intertwined as the discourse of

race involves a generalised food-chain view of human society, and authoritarian practices against out-groups are justified by ideas of racial hierarchy and competition.[9]

Western biases against China also constitute a recurrent theme in the discussion (see Figure 2). Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese critics of 'liberal elites' frame anti-liberalism as a revolt against the political hierarchy of the liberal world order rather than its economic structures. Nationalist commenters cite the fact that the 'white left' unjustly criticise China based on so-called universal values as one of the reasons why they dislike them and disdain such values. Before we illustrate how these ideological dimensions are at work in the construction of Chinese ethnic and political identities, it is helpful to briefly comment on the political function of neologisms invented by the online community, which, as a 'community of discourse', has its own 'parole' and 'grammar' (Salazar, 2018).

The very term 'white left' is a key rhetorical device in establishing a 'chain of equivalence' between anti-elitism, anti-Western attitudes and other far-right ideologies. It brings something into being by naming it and defining it in certain ways while excluding others. By framing progressive social movements as either an unrealistic fantasy or a conspiracy of privileged *white* elites, it effectively excludes the struggles of people of colour from left politics and mobilises the resentful feelings about Western hegemony and white supremacy in Chinese society to advance racist or Islamophobic arguments. The label 'left', on the other hand, ignores extensive criticisms of (neo)liberalism from the left and plays to the general antipathy to left ideologies in post-reform China. Krämer (2017: 1301) suggests that one of the communicative strategies deployed by right-wing populist leaders is 'routinely establishing equivalence' and characterising any upcoming issues as an 'equivalent manifestation of the same crisis'. The proliferation of the term *baizuo* helps establish inter-discursive linkages between different issue areas and enables one to utilise criticisms of the Western 'liberal elites' to discredit social activism within China. It is also frequently used in compound words such as *baizuo-nüquan* (white left feminists) and *baizuo-shengmu*.[10] As an effect of this linguistically constructed equivalence, for example, Islamophobic discourse also commonly features anti-feminist claims. It is noteworthy that the vocabulary is essentially misogynist as these derogatory compound words carry evidently feminine connotations and are used to attack users expressing a sense of morality or empathy. Just as in other countries,[11] the 'liberal elites' are portrayed as effeminate, sentimental and irrational, whereas their opponents claim to favour reason, law and force.

The threatening other and ethno-racial identity

> The white left have turned the beautiful and affluent Sweden into a notorious 'rape capital'…. I feel so lucky that I am Han Chinese (*hanzu*): our nation can never be assimilated by the inferior culture of extreme Islam, past, present, or future. (Q3, #279136207, 19 December 2017)

Although the main claims, ideologies and rhetorical strategies seem familiar, one of the key differences between right-wing populist discourse in Chinese cyberspace and that in Western societies lies in the perspective: they are narratives about the decline of the

Table 1. Dimensions of self–other relations articulated in the online discussion.

	The Chinese self-image	The other	Ideological features
Ethno-racial identity and the non-Western other	Chinese people (both PRC nationals and Chinese diasporas) as hard-working and high-achieving; the Chinese nation as homogeneous	Immigrants and refugees, Muslims, and black people, portrayed as lazy, crime-prone and self-entitled	Racism; xenophobia; nativism; Islamophobia
Political identity and the Western other	Chinese people (PRC nationals) as pragmatic, realistic, more aware of the danger of ideologies and rightly focused on economic growth and social stability	The 'white left' endorsing progressive values and tolerating the non-Western other, portrayed as naive or deceptive, leading 'Western civilisation' to its decline	Authoritarianism; anti-elitism; pragmatism; anti-welfarism; social Darwinism

other. The Chinese discourse adopts, reinterprets and instrumentalises the us–them oppositions central to extreme right ideologies in the Western context to construct both a threatening non-Western other in relation to China's ethno-racial identity *and* a declining Western liberal other vis-a-vis China's political identity. The former is embodied by the figure of non-white immigrants, black people and Muslims; the latter is represented by the 'white left', portrayed as an incompetent ruling class failing to recognise or cope with the threat posed by the non-Western other. The remainder of this section builds on interpretive analysis of selected segments of texts introduced earlier and details these interrelated dimensions of articulating self–other relations in the online discussion, which are summarised in Table 1. Lastly, it also illuminates how these narratives of popular geopolitics criticise the 'hypocrisy' of liberal internationalism while perpetuating a hierarchical imaginary of global racial and civilisational order.

The elaborations on why various 'inferior' out-groups constitute a threat to both Western societies (them versus them) and China (them versus us) range from overtly racist speech to ostensibly objective reports on their detrimental impact on social order, the economy and the 'ordinary people'. These often include highlighting the link between out-groups and crimes, claiming that they are treated favourably (by the 'white left') and having an 'unjustified sense of entitlement' (Krämer, 2017: 1299), and insisting that they are dependent on state welfare funded by the 'ordinary people'. Netizens again use neologisms such as *heilü* (black people and Muslims) and *heimolü* (black people, Mexicans and Muslims) to establish an equivalence between out-groups, and present these enormously diverse racial, ethnic and religious groups as a collective whole that is lazy, dependent on welfare, prone to crime and self-entitled. Europe in the refugee crisis, then, is projected as seeding its own destruction for accepting non-white immigrants and Muslims.

When it comes to how these out-groups might pose a threat to the Chinese self, the question is addressed differently in relation to Chinese diasporas and the Chinese nation-state. As the threads scrutinised here are clearly focused on diagnosing 'Western'

problems, many posts are concerned with the tension between Chinese diasporas and other minority ethnic groups in the West (especially the US), and some contributors present themselves as overseas students or immigrants. The narrative of diasporic Chineseness depicts transnational Chinese communities as diligent, highly motivated and high-achieving, but as oppressed by the white majority, who are described in several posts as 'sitting at the top of the food chain', and other minority groups. A complex sense of inferiority (to the white majority) regarding social status and superiority (over other minority groups) regarding the essentialised traits and characters of ethnicities is pervasive in this discourse. On the one hand, the representation of Chinese diasporas subscribes to the mainstream 'discursive distinction between "good" (i.e. hard-working) and "bad" (i.e. free-loading) immigrants', and align the transnational Chinese ethnic identity with the 'good' immigrant, which is an integrating strategy commonly used by other immigrant minority groups (Jackson and Bauder, 2013). On the other hand, the experiences of structural discrimination in a white majority society are interpreted through social-Darwinist analyses of ruthless competitions between races for power and survival that blatantly appeal to biological racism:

> Who would be a threat to the white left ruling class? Obviously, it's not the *heilü* [black people and Muslims]. First of all, they don't have the intelligence. Secondly social welfare would destroy the only bit of motivation to succeed they have. Only white people and the Chinese, with high IQ and high motivation to succeed, can pose a threat to their status. That's why they treat blacks and Muslims favourably and discriminate against whites and the Chinese. (Q3, #112770537, 23 July 2016)

In the context of discussing domestic issues, discussants cite misinformed statistics, personal anecdotes and political upheavals in Europe and the US as dire warnings against accepting any refugees or 'appeasing' Chinese Muslims and as supporting evidence for maintaining ethno-cultural homogeneity. Some express relief that China is relatively safe from the 'dangers' of immigration and ethno-cultural diversity, and others claim that the country is currently facing similar challenges, namely, the 'problems' of African immigrants in Guangzhou, whose number is hugely exaggerated, and Chinese Muslims. While African immigrants are portrayed mainly as a threat to social order, Muslims are framed more as an existential threat to the Chinese nation in the same way as they are to Western civilisation. Although there had always been a discernible Han supremacism online, only in recent years has hostility towards Chinese Muslims and anti-Islamic sentiment surged following a series of religiously motivated terrorist attacks (Leibold, 2016), and it has been intensified by the globally circulating narratives on 'Islamisation'.[12] Viewing Islam as essentially barbaric and backward, netizens warn that it is not historically unusual that 'advanced' civilisations are defeated by the backward.

The distinction between civilisation and barbarism, which generally views the Han as civilised and culturally superior, was a categorical one in the Sino-centric world view of imperial China (Callahan, 2012). However, it was not until the late 19th century that ideas of race and racial hierarchies were introduced to China by intellectuals seeking reforms and modernisation. As Dikötter (2015) has shown, a particular mode of racial thinking, according to which mankind is divided into distinct, hierarchically organised,

biological groups, profoundly influenced social and political thought in modern China throughout the 20th century. From the very beginning, Chinese intellectuals' translation and interpretation of Western scholarship at the turn of the century tied theories of race with an evolutionary understanding of human history as struggles between different races, as exemplified by Yan Fu's famous (mis)translation of T.H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*. Interpreting the doctrine of survival of the fittest in biological evolution as 'the superior prevail, the inferior are eliminated' (*youshenglietan*), the social-Darwinist analysis of human society was widely celebrated at the time, when China was faced with unprecedented challenges from Western imperial powers. The category of race and the notion of racial struggles were appropriated not only to make sense of the international system that China had been forced to engage with, but also to construct the concept of a Chinese nation (*zhonghuaminzu*) as an 'organic entity with an uninterrupted line of descent' (Dikötter, 2015). Under the influence of prominent intellectuals and political leaders such as Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen (Zhang, 2014), the idea that the Chinese belong to a biological group called the 'yellow race', and that the white and yellow races are superior to others in terms of intelligence and cultural traits, was instrumental in the formation of national consciousness.

While racism is formally denied under communist rule, racial thinking continues to underpin various 'myths of descent' in official and popular imaginations of Chinese ethnic identity (Sautman, 1997). Furthermore, the Soviet Union-inspired approach to governing minority ethnic groups has not been free from hierarchisation and paternalism despite the official denunciation of Han chauvinism (Law, 2012). Racism and Han supremacism entail parallel structures of racialisation that essentialise differences and look down on certain ethno-racial groups as inferior or backwards. In this light, the online discourse on the racial superiority of white people and the Chinese, as well as on the struggle between races, clearly mirrors prevailing racial theories in the early 20th century, and has its roots in the long-standing racial nationalism inseparable from the formation of Chinese national identity. On the other hand, this racial nationalism has been refashioned by adopting and expanding on the arguments and perspectives of nationalist populism in contemporary Western societies. Although the emphasis varies in imagining ethnic identity in diaspora and domestic contexts, in both cases, the reproduction of the diligent, intelligent and unified Chinese self involves ascribing inferiority and barbarism to both external (non-white immigrants) and internal others (Muslim minority groups).

The declining other and political identity

If the predication of the non-Western other is straightforwardly negative and focused on polarising racial or religious traits, then the ways in which the Western other is characterised are much more nuanced and multifaceted. Research on Chinese nationalism has explicated the significance of Western (and Japanese) imperialism and collective memories of 'national humiliation' for the evolution of Chinese national identity (Callahan, 2012; Gries, 2004). While cyber-nationalism has typically been exacerbated by conflicts in traditional security areas such as territorial disputes and the status of Taiwan, recent criticisms of the 'white left' shift focus away from security dilemmas to normative

principles, generating a pro-globalisation, anti-liberal and post-revolutionary narrative about China's political identity against a declining other trapped by its own achievements.

The conviction that liberal democracy is self-destructive due to the rise of postmaterialist values and an appreciation of the doctrines of economic growth and technological advancement in capitalist modernity are intertwined in the dual-faced evaluation of the Western other.[13] Based on their scrutiny of various crises in Western societies, netizens identify the superiority of the Chinese self no longer in the ancient glories of the Chinese civilisation, as cultural conservatives would do, but instead within the allegedly pragmatic, rational and non-moralising approach to economic growth and social stability taken by the current authoritarian regime. While some explain this pragmatism and resistance to 'left ideologies' by invoking the traumatising experience of the Cultural Revolution (and compare the 'white left' to Mao's red guards), others attribute Chinese pragmatism to a timeless construal of history in which the Chinese nation has always been more 'politically savvy' than Westerners. In this de-historicised notion of political Chineseness, the Confucian moral principles valued by cultural nationalists are dismissed as a kind of 'political correctness' and replaced with a demoralised and ahistorical account of power struggles that seem completely unchanged from the succession of dynasties to factional competitions within the Communist Party:

> We have thousands of years of political history. Longevity is a wisdom. For thousands of years we have seen so many lying politicians, traitors, and bloody factional struggles. (Q1, #125457607, 7 October 2016)

> I think most Chinese people are better than the 'white left' because we are sober. We understand that … reality is more important than ideals; labour creates wealth; war destroys wealth; real interests before anything else; evils should never be tolerated; order is of utmost importance. (Q1, #383348716, 4 May 2018)

Thus, the pragmatism of 'Chinese people' as a timeless and abstract category who 'have seen everything' and are most aware of the rules of power politics is contrasted with the idealism and moralism of the 'white left'. The ostensibly anti-ideological preference for pragmatism is entangled with more explicit forms of extreme right discourses (e.g. racism), on the one hand, and coupled with implicit justifications of the political status quo, on the other. As noted earlier, at the core of the political discourse is a realist authoritarianism that rejects progressive values such as human rights, feminism, minority rights and environmentalism, not primarily in defence of traditional culture, but on the grounds that they are unrealistic and/or damaging for economic growth and social stability. A social-Darwinist reasoning is applied to understandings of both international affairs and domestic socio-economic structures, which emphasises the law of the jungle and the ruthlessness of realpolitik. It is held that only strong, self-reliant nations, individuals and races can gain themselves respect, and that 'competition is perpetual and mainstream' (Q2, #228334665). This leads to the support for an authoritarian strong state, on the one hand, and disapproval of egalitarianism and the welfare state, on the other. In the simultaneously collectivist and individualistic framework of analysis, national survival and

security must take precedence over personal freedom, and redistributive policies are considered discouraging for hard-working individuals and 'anaesthetising' for 'the weak'.[14]

Furthermore, the perception of global shifts in economic and military power feeds into the recognition of the party-state's regime legitimacy and deepens the disenchantment with ideals of liberal democracy that used to seem appealing to Chinese elites. The argument is twofold. First, netizens endorse one economically deterministic version of Inglehart's theory of postmaterialism (without using his terms) that links the acceptance of postmaterialist values with stages of economic development. They accordingly argue that China's sober pragmatism comes from the fact that the country has a developing economy and citizens are more preoccupied with problems of survival, whereas Western societies have lost their grasp of reality after prolonged periods of peace and prosperity. Second, it is then inferred that China has a growing international influence precisely because of its concentration on development instead of 'ideologies', while Western societies are falling apart because long-term prosperity has led to the rise of the arrogant 'white left' holding (and preaching) calamitous liberal values:

> Because Chinese people is the most realistic nation.… The Western world has long been advocating for freedom and democracy. When we were weak and humiliated, we rushed to worshiping these ideas. But now the Western world is over. Society is torn apart by its own ideas, like worn-out clothes. We of course won't continue to wear these worn-out clothes. (Q1, #170742068, 17 May 2017)

However, although the Western other at the present conjuncture is pictured as decadent and politically naive, similar to extreme right discourses in the West, there is also a nostalgic narrative about a glorified past of the 'Western civilisation'. The nostalgia rests less on identification with traditional values or a utopian vision of social life (Harrison and Bruter, 2011) than on a 'utilitarian' admiration for the past achievements of 'Western civilisation', understood through the lens of whiteness. The glorification of the imperialist past of the Western/white other is rooted in the racial nationalism discussed earlier and consistent with the world view centred on the survival of the strongest. As historian Cheng Yinghong (Cheng, 2018) points out, behind Chinese criticisms of the 'white left' is a long-standing imaginary of global racial order that views the Chinese and the white race as 'superior' to others. Chinese racial nationalists thus feel both satisfied with and regretful for the decline of their 'fellow superior civilisation' caused by the 'white left' and their tolerance of the different and/or the 'inferior'. The strength and aggressiveness of Western imperialism in the past is contrasted with the 'toothless' liberalism of today:

> Think how powerful and aggressive the European whites were in the Arab world 90 years ago. Today the descendants of the white are frightened by the descendants of jihadists like bunnies.… Nothing can save Europe when she's digging herself a grave through self-deception and giving up on cultural assimilation. (Q1, #131971378, 19 November 2016)

Lastly, while Chinese domestic issues do not occupy a central place in the threads examined here, a few answers warn that a growing number of elite youngsters in the more developed regions of the country are becoming the 'yellow left', or becoming identified

with liberal values and engaged in, for instance, environmental or feminist activism. Conservative netizens claim that these youngsters are similarly out of touch with reality and overflowing with sympathy. In fact, the label 'white left' has travelled from online debates about Western politics to those on domestic problems, being used to stigmatise already highly oppressed social movements. Ultimately, the Chinese political identity performed in the discourse of realist authoritarianism is one that eliminates dissenting voices and delegitimates efforts to pursue social changes as detrimental to the paramount imperatives of economic growth and stability.

Popular narratives of global (racial and civilisational) order

The Chinese antipathy towards the Western 'liberal elites' is not only grounded on a reaffirmation of racial nationalism and an appropriation of globally circulating 'new right' ideas (Drolet and Williams, 2018), but also entangled with a revolt against the liberal hegemony of international order that invokes anti-imperialist perspectives usually associated with the left. Casual observers unfamiliar with the political spectrum in Western politics explain their detestation of the 'white left' by stating that these are the same ones trying to impose 'so-called universal values' on China and other non-Western countries. If the populist rhetoric in Western societies takes issue with the 'condescending' attitudes of 'liberal elites' towards the 'ordinary people', then the anti-*baizuo* discourse in Chinese cyberspace is also concerned with the 'condescending' attitudes of Westerners, 'liberal' or otherwise, towards the rest of the world. This becomes particularly irritating for nationalist netizens when combined with perceptions of a rising China and a declining West. As this user puts it:

> When you talk with American liberals you have an odd feeling of disjuncture. This is a group that's no longer doing any better than us [Chinese], waning, about to be left behind by the wheels of history. But they're still looking at you in such a patronising way. (Q1, #129901238, 5 November 2016)

Popular narratives of international relations not only protest against the West's 'ideologically driven' biases against China — or the Western othering of China (Turner, 2013) — but also express a general discontent with the Euro-American hegemony in world politics and especially projects of seeking to 'impose universal values' on the rest of the world. It is argued, for instance, that the refugee crisis itself is one of the ramifications of Western interference in the name of universal values.[15] The alleged moralism of the 'white left' and their sympathy for the less fortunate in the Third World are interpreted as driven by a sense of paternalistic superiority and nothing but 'an extreme form of "white people are destined to have the right to determine world order"' (Q3, #108431174, 29 June 2016). The counter-narrative to the perceived hierarchies, hypocrisies and inequalities in the liberal order, however, takes recourse to a resolutely realist framework of analysis centred on concepts such as state sovereignty and national interests, an orientation commonly observed in popular geopolitical discourses in cyberspace. In a study of online military forums, for example, Zhou (2005: 543) shows that the nationalist thinking formed in these communities is shaped by an 'interest-driven game-playing

paradigm' to interpret world politics built on 'Western concepts and ideas'. In other words, in the apparent resistance to the Euro-American hegemony, digital citizens re-inscribe Eurocentric concepts of race, nation and modernity, and reinforce realist power struggles as the only possible way of understanding and knowing international relations. The analytics of power games is applied not only to nations, but also to races and civilisations. As mentioned earlier in the discussion of racial nationalism, the recognition of and frustration over white supremacy leads not to the rejection of the global racial hierarchy, but to its internalisation and a desire to be an equal to the dominant (white) race:

> Respect and racial status must be fought for with real power [*shili*]…. It is only because North Korea has nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles that the US is willing to dialogue with them. A weak nation or race would not be accepted [as equals], even if you accepted their culture and became as civilised and enlightened [*wenming kaihua*] as them. (Q1, #397979588, 22 May 2018)

The global imaginary also yields a series of essentialist civilisational analyses, which, as mentioned earlier, envisage Islam as an existential threat to Western civilisation and argue that a civilisation inevitably declines when it becomes 'over-civilised' (Q3, #116846381, 14 August 2016) to the extent of tolerating the uncivilised (see also Cong, 2018). Chinese observers make historical analogies between this scenario and the fall of the Roman Empire, as well as the Uprising of the Five barbarians (*wuhu luanhua*) in Chinese history. In a hugely popular essay on Trump's planned 'Muslim travel ban' posted in May 2016 that has gathered more than 25,000 upvotes (Q4, #76415692), a Zhihu columnist recounts the demises of various ancient civilisations and concludes that a civilisation is destined to fall if it 'loses the will and courage to defend itself'. The American president would make a similar case in his Warsaw speech a year later, in which he also called for defending 'the West' as 'every last inch of civilisation' (White House, 2017). Through drawing historical analogies and in parallel to the global racial imaginary, the Chinese civilisation is projected not as a threat, but rather as an equal rival to 'the (white) West', both presumed to stand among the rank of the civilised as opposed to the barbaric and the backward.

Conclusion: On anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies

This article has investigated emergent right-wing discourses on the Chinese Internet that combine the vocabulary and arguments of right-wing populism in the Western context with pre-existing expressions of cyber-nationalism, cyber-racism and Han supremacism. Through qualitative analysis of around one thousand posts discussing the Western 'liberal elites' collected from a popular social media website, this research details how sections of Chinese Internet users with a keen interest in global politics adopt the style of right-wing populism to reconstruct self–other relations and produce popular narratives of international order. The most frequently raised issues in the debate are immigration/refugees, Islam/Muslims and race, while other topics include the economy, Western biases against China and new social movements such as feminism and environmentalism.

Instead of populism as such, the discourse instrumentalises anti-elitist rhetorics to express racial nationalist and realist authoritarian beliefs. By naming, analysing and denouncing the 'white left', conservative netizens reiterate the superiority and homogeneity of China's ethno-racial identity against a threatening yet inferior non-Western other, and articulate China's political identity against a declining Western other.

While the rise of right-wing populist movements in Europe and the US has been linked to popular revolts against economic globalisation, the hostility towards liberal values on Chinese social media is associated with anti-Western sentiments and discontents with the normative hierarchy of the liberal order. However, this popular geopolitical discourse consolidates both external and internal hegemonies in the very process of challenging the Euro-American hegemony. On the one hand, it perpetuates Eurocentric notions of race, nation and progress, limiting the possibilities of development to 'a particular vision of Western modernity' (Barabantseva, 2012) modelled on global capitalism and racialised nativism. On the other hand, it also reinforces 'internal hegemony by suppressing differences within the nation' (Dirlik, 1996: 114), both in terms of alternative political imaginations and expressions of heterogeneous ethno-cultural identities.

Although some of the more extremist aspects of the online discourse diverge from the official ideology and policies, it generally defends the legitimacy of authoritarian rule by positing that security and stability take priority over individual rights and liberty. It coincides with the official narratives that criticise universal values and advocate greater confidence over the Chinese regime (*zhidu zixin*). Furthermore, although online discussions on the ongoing governmental practices of the mass detention and forced assimilation of Muslim minority populations in Xinjiang (Finley, 2019) are strictly censored within China, it would come as no surprise that these policies would be justified by the racial nationalist, Islamophobic and authoritarian ideologies prevalent in extreme right discourses. On the global level, as these digital citizens appear to be against the underpinning *values* of the liberal order but not its *rules*, especially those regarding economic cooperation and governance, they are likely to concur with IR scholars who predict that China as a rising power is pursuing an 'open economic order' and a more 'equal' or pluralist political order without seeking to challenge the liberal order as a rules-based framework of global governance (Breslin, 2018; Wu, 2018).

However, the logics of anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies may have more implications for China's domestic politics than for the multilateral institutions and processes of global governance. They have enabled both Internet users and the party-state to mobilise the popular hostility against Western hegemony and perceptions of geopolitical rivalry for the purpose of delegitimating dissenting perspectives on the country's political regime, economic system and social inequalities. As conservative netizens apply their condemnation of the 'white left' to criticising, for example, feminist movements within China, the Chinese government has been deploying the rhetoric of 'the instigation of foreign powers' to frame domestic activisms as instances of Western interference. If this strategy of internalising the international and externalising the domestic can be considered as a form of non-Western agency, it is one that perpetuates and politicises the dichotomy of China versus the West, which is itself part of the hegemonic conception of world order continuously performed into being by foreign policy discourses and IR scholarship. Coming to terms with the perils of anti-Western

Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies may start with acknowledging the paradoxes, hierarchies and inconsistencies of the liberal project on national and international levels. It invites us to view 'Western' populism and 'Eastern' authoritarianism not as neatly separated, but as built on co-constitutive knowledges and epistemologies produced in interconnected histories and presents.

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Notes

1. Q4, answer ID #76415692. For information on all the online discussion threads quoted in this article, see Table 2 in Appendix 1.
2. An informal online poll from June 2017 showed that 97.3% of over 210,000 respondents were against 'China taking foreign refugees' and the figure was 97.7% in a similar poll from June 2018 (Li, 2018).
3. Harrison and Bruter (2011) view 'negative identity' and authoritarianism as the two core dimensions of extreme right ideologies.
4. Although biological racism has been excluded from official and academic languages, it has certainly not disappeared from the popular mind, as shown in extreme right movements worldwide.
5. Much of the 'populism in power' literature is focused on Latin America. However, the governmental use of populist rhetoric in China bears more resemblance to the 'official populism' in Russia examined by Robinson and Milne (2017).
6. Within the limits of feasibility, we disregarded the 152 answers that contained only images, videos, irrelevant texts and metaphorical expressions beyond our capabilities to interpret. This study is therefore biased towards texts and does not take into account visual imagery on its own.
7. Not all those critical of the 'white left' explicitly support right-wing ideologies. Some claim that they disdain their arrogance and hypocrisy without appealing to, for example, exclusionary nativism or racism. A small fraction of criticisms is from the left, which echoes left critiques of neoliberalism such as Fraser's (2016) thesis on what she calls 'progressive neoliberalism'.
8. It is said that when Emperor Hui was told that the common people were dying in a famine, he asked 'If there aren't enough crops, why don't they eat meat porridge?'
9. Zakhorov (2015: 82) has examined how the racial discourse in post-Soviet Russia is shaped by 'Darwinian evolutionism', which together generated 'possibilities for various eccentric combination of ideas', including critiques of Western 'political correctness'. Comparison between China and Russia in this regard would raise important questions for future research. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the suggestion.

10. *Shengmu* literally translates as the holy mother. It is a derogatory term supposed to mean a sanctimonious person (usually female) or a 'virtue signaller'. *Shengmu* has been used to label both politicians such as Angela Merkel and ordinary female citizens displaying sympathies towards socially disadvantaged groups.

11. For the role of masculinity in the mobilisation of radical right groups in Germany, Sweden and the US, see Kimmel (2018).

12. Rumours and conspiracy theories about Muslim crimes in the West are widespread in the Chinese cyber-sphere with the help of recently emerged far right new media outlets such as *Shendu News*.

13. Similar views have been expressed by academics. Cong Riyun (Cong, 2018: 36-37), a professor in political theory at a prestigious university, recently argued that the transition from materialist to postmaterialist values, resulting in cultural diversity and the decline of nationalism, has caused the 'crisis of Western civilisation'. Cong writes that the 'elite class' in the West has lost their 'will to defend their culture' and chooses to accept the 'slow suicide of Western civilisation'. He also warns that the rise of postmaterialist values might weaken the momentum of development in China.

14. *Ruozhe* (the weak) or *ruoshi qunti* (weak or vulnerable groups) occur in 50 of the answers. The gist is that dominant or 'strong' groups such as the 'white left' show sympathy towards 'the weak' to satisfy their need for the moral high ground, and welfare policies render 'the weak' dependent on the sympathy of the strong. Some argue that the notion of 'protecting the weak has no appeals in Chinese society', which makes competitions ruthless yet is beneficial for economic growth (Q2, #258523940, 11 November 2017).

15. This view is also represented in mainstream state-run media (see, e.g., Cheng, 2015).

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Appendix I

Table 2. Information on the question-and-answer threads quoted in the article.

ID	Question and link	No. of answers as of 19 June 2018	No. of Comments as of 19 June 2018	No. of views as of 18 September 2018
Q1	为什么很多中国人鄙视受过高等教育的西方「白左」 Why do many Chinese people despise the well-educated 'white left' in the West? https://www.zhihu.com/question/51331837	730	7523	5,222,926
Q2	是不是很多中国人不喜欢白左？ Is it true that many Chinese dislike the white left? https://www.zhihu.com/question/42472419	268	2982	894,309
Q3	如何看待白左？ How to view the white left? https://www.zhihu.com/question/21459364	193	1239	619,659
Q4	为什么唐纳德·特朗普说中国人坏话没有激怒美国人，说穆斯林却激怒了 Why were Americans not irritated when Donald Trump said bad things about the Chinese, but they were enraged when he spoke badly of Muslims? https://www.zhihu.com/question/38426001	N/A	N/A	2,098,140